

Peace at Rome? Placing Augustus' *Ara Pacis* in context(s)

Alison Cooley

The Altar of Augustan Peace (*Ara Pacis Augustae*) has aroused controversy throughout its long history, often as much for its setting as for the monument itself. Since 2006 many have visited it in its lavish new museum, but this too has come in for vigorous and outspoken criticism. Alison Cooley traces some of the controversial interpretations and decisions surrounding the altar and examines not only its 'peaceful' but also its highly political aspects.

From fascist hi-jackers to vandals and Valentino

In the summer of 2009 vandals not only daubed paint on the outside of the sparkling new *Ara Pacis* museum, but also left a toilet and rolls of toilet paper outside the new museum as a comment on its design. Richard Meier, the designer, had come up with a building that some have regarded as too modern and out-of-place. Gianni Alemanno, the right-wing mayor of Rome, had earlier even proposed a referendum to decide whether to allow the structure to remain or whether to remove it to the outskirts of the city. For now the altar remains where it is, not only a tourist attraction in its own right, but used as an exhibition space, recently housing 300 dresses designed over the last 45 years by Valentino.

Whatever one may think of the design of the new museum, located alongside the river Tiber, next to the Mausoleum of Augustus, the altar's current setting offers protection not only from pollution and the elements, but also from both oblivion and political hi-jacking. For many centuries, the altar had remained buried beneath a palace.

A few fragments of the altar had been brought to light from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, but it was only the determination of Mussolini's fascist regime that brought the altar to light. The recovery of the altar was one of the highlights in celebrations of the bi-millennium of Augustus' birth, and was appropriately inaugurated on the emperor's birthday, 23rd September 1938. It was a core part of

Mussolini's self-representation as successor to the empire of ancient Rome.

Even before it was housed in this pavilion, fragments of the altar were put on display at the Baths of Diocletian where they were viewed by Adolf Hitler himself on 7th May 1938, whilst on a visit to Rome. At this earlier stage in the altar's resurrection too, then, the processes of recovery and display were highly political and controversial.

Presenting the myths of Rome: Aeneas, Romulus, and 'Peace'

So, what is this monument that has attracted such attention? Why did Mussolini want to appropriate it? Why have people since then contested aspects of its upkeep and display?

When I returned to Rome from Spain and Gaul, having settled affairs successfully in these provinces, in the consulship of Tiberius Nero and Publius Quinctilius, the senate decreed that an altar of Augustan Peace should be consecrated in thanks for my return on the Field of Mars, and ordered magistrates and priests and Vestal Virgins to perform an annual sacrifice there.

This is how Augustus celebrated the altar of Augustan Peace, in his account of his own achievements. Vowed on 4th July 13 B.C. – the day on which Augustus returned to Rome from campaigning in the west – the altar was consecrated on 30th January 9 B.C.

The altar stands within an unroofed monumental enclosure, which is carved with elaborate reliefs.

Large panels are usually interpreted as juxtaposing Aeneas sacrificing to the *Penates* (the ancestral gods he had rescued from Troy) with the god Mars at the discovery of the twins Romulus and Remus, who had been abandoned and suckled by a she-wolf. In other words, these two pictures juxtaposed the foundation myth of the city of Rome with that of the Julian family, who claimed descent from Aeneas' son Iulus.

At the other end of the enclosure appear the goddess Roma seated on top of a pile of weapons and another female figure who is nursing twin babies against a background symbolizing peace and prosperity by land and sea. She is variously interpreted as Italy, Peace, Mother Earth, or Venus, but the image intentionally evoked many different ideas so that there is no 'correct' answer as to her identity.

On the sides of the enclosure appears a long procession of life-sized figures, contemporary Romans participating fairly informally in some kind of ceremony: children tug at adults' clothing, trying to get their attention; the grown-ups themselves turn to each other to chat. Beneath the processional panels are luxuriant scrolls of acanthus plants, peopled by tiny animals and birds.

Processions and 'peace': problems of interpretation

At first glance, the interpretation of this monument seems straightforward: it celebrates the peace brought to the Roman world by Augustus, and the procession recalls the ceremony to consecrate the altar. Nevertheless, interpretation of the altar is actually far from straightforward both in terms of overall message and of individual detail. The procession of men and women sculpted around the altar's enclosure poses many problems if we try to identify it as representing a real historical moment. It could recall the inaugura-

tion of the altar and Augustus' return to Rome in 13 B.C.; a procession celebrating Augustus' election as greatest pontiff in March 12 B.C.; or the consecration of the altar itself in 9 B.C. It seems unlikely, however, that the combination of figures depicted in the procession – Augustus as greatest pontiff (only from March 12 B.C.), the Elder Drusus (absent on campaign), Agrippa (who died in 12 B.C.), the priest of Jupiter (appointed only in 10 B.C.) – could all have been present. Although the procession sculpted on the altar does look realistic, it is far from a photographic representation of a particular historical moment. Rather it is an ideal representation of a religious procession depicting the main priests of Rome in their four colleges alongside Augustus and members of the imperial family.

Even the whole idea of peace needs careful consideration. The word *pax* in Latin has a different connotation from our word 'peace', and means something more like 'pacification', peace achieved by conquest. The altar of Augustan Peace commemorated the pacification of Gaul and Spain, lands to the west of Italy as far as the Atlantic seaboard and the straits of Gibraltar, then known as the Pillars of Hercules. In this way, Augustus bettered Julius Caesar by extending Roman control right up to the shores of Ocean. This altar was complemented by another one, the altar of Fortune the Home-Bringer, decreed for Augustus' successful return from the East a few years earlier, having negotiated peace with Rome's old enemy, the Parthians. Both altars were in effect substitutes for a triumph, a type of honour which Augustus no longer desired for himself, and between them commemorated the pacification of the whole world. In addition to the representation of Roma seated upon weapons captured from the enemy, the very location of the altar, one mile beyond the sacred boundary of the city of Rome, marked the point where generals returning to Rome would lay down their military command to re-enter the city as a civilian. Finally, the overall appearance of the altar is believed to imitate the gates of Janus in the Roman Forum, which were closed only when the whole of the Roman empire was at peace.

Augustus, tamer of the cosmos

An influential book in the 1980s claimed that an Egyptian obelisk, set up in 10/9 B.C., was a sundial that cast a shadow through the altar on Augustus' birthday, in this way demonstrating the cosmological significance of the birth of Augustus, destined by the gods to be the bringer of peace. Nevertheless, any shadow cast by the ball mounted on top of the obelisk towards the altar on 23rd September would have been so tiny and moving so

quickly that the connection, though attractive, must remain in the realm of scholarly fiction.

Even though often still called a 'sundial', the obelisk was in fact a solar meridian instrument, which indicated noon on each day (and did not mark the passing hours). Its purpose was to measure the changing length of days and nights, not to tell the time. It would have been useful for indicating the compass point of true north, but above all it allowed the accuracy of the calendar to be checked against the solar year, since it indicated the progress of the sun from solstice to solstice. At Rome, it was the greatest pontiff who was in charge of the calendar, and Julius Caesar had some years earlier intervened to correct and align the seasons with the calendar months. Once Augustus was elected as greatest pontiff in 12 B.C., he was able to make some final refinements to the calendar in 9 B.C. Setting up a monumental meridian instrument in the Field of Mars in 10 B.C. was therefore a symbolic demonstration that Rome's calendar was now fixed and accountable.

Cementing the dynasty

The altar shows clearly the importance of visual and material culture for understanding the ideology and self-representation of Augustus. On this single monument we see many of the defining features of the Augustan age. As well as showcasing the value given to religion in Augustus' Rome, it celebrates the imposition of peace through warfare and conquest, and it represents Augustus himself as first among equals. Above all, through its novel depiction of children, it stresses the importance of family values, recently reinforced via Augustus' legislation promoting marriage and penalizing adultery. Not only was the altar dedicated on the birthday of Augustus' wife Livia, but it also depicted the entire imperial family on its north and south sides, suggesting that Augustus' plans for founding a dynasty were already well advanced. In amongst all the controversies, some messages of the monument rang out loud and clear.

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